

February 6, 2011

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Environment and Communications
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RE: The status, health and sustainability of Australia's koala population

Dear Secretary,

I am a veterinarian with a special interest in the health and habitat of the koala.

I have lived in the Kempsey area for 25 years. Soon after I moved here I met Jean Starr, founder of the Koala Preservation Society of NSW (KPS) and Koala Hospital in Port Macquarie, who introduced me to my first koala suffering from Chlamydial disease. The KPS provided me with funding to do the first study of koalas in the Macleay Valley. I later worked at the Koala Hospital as the Supervisor and later as a volunteer for many years. I continued to collect records of koala sightings in the Kempsey Shire including koala mortality on the Pacific Highway and other roads. I lobbied the Kempsey Shire Council to do a Koala Management Plan for twenty years and in 2008 they commissioned Biolink Ecological Consultants to do a study for the eastern part of the Shire. I was a member of the KSC Koala Advisory Group which facilitated this study. My knowledge of koalas comes from direct observations and the scientific literature and I am informed by koala carer and environmental groups. As I went to Blackwood High School in the Adelaide Hills and have friends and family there I also have an interest in the South Australian koala issues.

The purpose of this submission is to provide further information, evidence and observations in relation to the following terms of reference

The iconic status of the koala and the history of its management.

The koala is an Australian icon. Bill Phillips in his book "The Little Australians We Would Hate to Lose" explains why koalas have become a symbol of the Australian landscape and culture. A koala sleeping in a gum tree represents Australia.

Recently Julia Gillard mentioned a koala in one of her first speeches to the nation when she became Prime Minister. Oprah Winfrey's first stop in her recent visit to Australia was Hamilton Island where she was photographed with a koala.

Bill Phillips also provides a good description of the history of the management of koalas prior to 1990. At this time the koala in NSW was only protected by the

National Parks & Wildlife Act 1978 which prohibited harming a koala but gave no protection from habitat loss. Rapid development in some coastal towns e.g. Port Macquarie, Coffs Harbour and its detrimental effect on the health of koalas gave rise to the Koala Hospital in Port Macquarie and a large network of koala carers along the north-east coast. The Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995 and State Environmental Planning Policy 44 (SEPP44) were gazetted in response to the concerns of these carers. In 2007 the NSW government produced the Recovery Plan for the Koala as the koala population continued to decline.

Estimates of koala populations and the adequacy of current counting methods

When scientists look for solutions to a problem, they have to ask, and be asked, the right questions.. Since it is impossible to know how many koalas there are in Australia, population estimates have been calculated for each State with koala populations. These calculations are based on records of sightings (dead and alive), E.g. NSW Wildlife Atlas, community and field surveys.

Vegetation mapping has been used to identify and classify koala habitat but Ground-truthing is necessary. The presence of scats is the main indicator used for estimating koala numbers in a particular location.

I believe the estimates are not giving or able to give an adequate picture, are mostly over estimates because of extrapolation and the variability range can be quite wide and quite alarming, e.g. a NSW koala population estimate 1000-10,000 (P.11.Recovery Plan for the Koala, 2008).

Recommendation for consideration by the Committee

I recommend the Committee considers the decline of the koala populations in the eastern states. Whilst some populations may be doing OK there are many which are not and local extinctions are occurring every year and the Macleay Valley is a good example of this trend.

Knowledge of koala habitat

Knowledge of koala habitat in NSW is increasing due to the requirement for fauna assessments for development consent. However there are still only a couple of Shire-wide Comprehensive Koala Plans of Management as encouraged by SEPP44 which require more detailed studies of koala habitat. This means that only a development application triggers a fauna and koala habitat assessment and in the case of SEPP44 the DA has to be for an area over 1 hectare which precludes many blocks of remnant bushland in urban areas. There are large areas of potential koala habitat which have not been identified except for the occasional koala sighting. CKPoMs are becoming very expensive and few rural Shires can afford to do them

Identification of koala habitat does not necessarily mean koalas are present as there is a lot of potential habitat which is unoccupied.

The Biolink study for the Kempsey Shire indicated less than 50% of koala habitat was occupied by koalas with less than 400 animals remaining. Instead of asking how many koalas are there, the government should be asking how few. How little primary habitat is left for koalas, how fragmented is the habitat, how fragmented are the koala populations, how little of the available habitat is actually occupied by koalas, how degraded and how protected is their remaining habitat.

One fact is certain. The koala populations in eastern Australia (Qu, NSW and Vic are declining..(NKCMS) This decline is very obvious in the Macleay Valley as it is in most valleys on the east coast. The high rainfall and nutrient rich soils have made the eucalypt forests on the east coast a stronghold for the koala. It is these forests which are under the most threat from land clearing, logging and residential development and consequently the koalas have the highest incidence of disease. There are not many

koalas in Australia living in optimal primary habitat and there are not many actually living in protected reserves. More koala habitat needs to be protected in reserves to assist with the recovery of koala populations and to improve the connectivity of these populations. However there needs to be an increase in funding to manage these reserves as the NSW NP& WS staff are struggling with insufficient man-power and vehicles.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee

Acquisition of more quality koala habitat for protection in the public reserve system
An improvement in the funding mechanisms for agencies managing these reserves

Threats to koala habitat such as logging, land clearing, poor management, attacks from feral and domestic dogs, disease, roads and urban development.

The main threats to koalas in the Kempsey Shire are habitat loss from logging and land clearing and the associated consequences of malnutrition and disease.

Logging

Koalas are the biggest losers in the continued unsustainable logging of native forests and the associated politics.

I recently wrote a submission (see attachment) for the Integrated Forestry Operational Agreements review. The harvesting operation in Compartment 31 of Maria River State Forest last year made me realise the ecological prescriptions which are supposed to protect threatened species are actually a prescription for extinction.

The process is as follows:

1. Pre-logging survey is done by qualified ecologist and finds signs of koala activity (scats).
2. Prescription for logging under threatened species licensing requirements is stated as 5 koala food trees (KFT) to be retained per hectare of logged area.
3. Trees to be retained are selected randomly by forestry officer with no knowledge of koala ecology or nutrition and marked with a K with pink paint.
4. Over half the trees marked are within 5 metres of the main ridge road and the rest not more than 20 metres. None look like suitable KFT
5. All the retained trees are of the same species (Tallowwood)
6. Logging commences and the area is decimated. No large Ta trees on the moister slopes/gullies are retained.
7. After logging, the area is burned and the K marks on the trees are erased.
8. The area is uninhabitable for koalas.
9. The retained trees are not retained in perpetuity. If or when the area is logged again in 5-10 years, another survey will be done which will show no koala activity because there are no suitable KFT and the retained trees will be harvested.
11. The area of Compartment 31 which was not logged last year will be logged some time in the future (I was told by the Wauchope Forestry Office). When this happens, the annihilation of koala habitat and the local extinction of koalas from this forest will be complete.

The Private Native Forestry Code of Practice is also a sham. Landowners are still being allowed to log in core koala habitat and Property Vegetation Plans are essentially only timber harvesting plans. When I rang the local Forestry Permit officer to report logging in core koala habitat I was told "we can't stop logging just because there are threatened species present"

Forestry workers have little knowledge of koala ecology and even less regard for koala welfare. DECCW are breaching their own regulations. The Environmental Defenders Office is investigating these breaches.

This is happening in many other places along the east coast, from Eden to Grafton and beyond. See attached NCEC Bulletin.

Koala populations along the east coast will not survive the unsustainable logging of their habitat.

Urban and rural residential development

Koala habitat loss from development continues in NSW because the legislation enables developments to proceed with mitigation measures used as an excuse that koalas are being considered in the process. However removing core koala habitat and mitigating this loss by replanting trees somewhere else does not protect resident koalas. Koalas have evolved as sedentary animals using the same food trees within a home range throughout their life. Removing this habitat results in great stress for the affected koala and other koalas in the vicinity as their social organisations disrupted. This is the precursor for chlamydial disease. As this process continues we will be left with lots of nice habitat but no koalas because they have all died waiting for the new trees to grow. When Biolink prepared the draft CKPoM for the eastern part of the Kempsey Shire they recommended that no development be approved in identified core koala habitat areas. However this was not approved by the Department of Planning and the Kempsey Shire Council then prepared a long flow chart for planners to follow for DAs in koala habitat with the end result always being that development proceeds. The Kempsey CKPoM is now in limbo as DECCW, Dpt. of Planning and KSC decide how many trees should be planted to compensate for trees lost for a development in core koala habitat. The effectiveness of the Kempsey CKPoM is also compromised because both the local DECCW forestry officer and the Catchment Management Authority refused to be part of the process.

The Recovery Plan for the Koala recommended that SEPP44 be reviewed and amended but as this is administered by the Dpt. of Planning it hasn't been done.

I hope the Senate Committee understands that I am writing these comments to stress how the NSW government is failing to protect the koala and its habitat.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee

Logging

Australia needs a new forest policy urgently. Logging of native forests for wood chips is a national disgrace. It is killing koalas and gliders and degrading the biodiversity of the forest ecosystems. Forest policy is too complex for me to address in this submission. However Judith Ajani in her book "Forest Wars" has addressed this issue as did the former Queensland Premier Peter Beattie.

Until a new policy is in place the IFOAs should be monitored by an independent agency to ensure the environmental outcomes promised by the timber industry are being achieved.

The PNF Code of Practice must be enforced and monitored. However it is ridiculous to expect land owners or logging contractors to do proper fauna assessments and I recommend that these assessments be done by an independent ecological consultant as is required for other developments. The NSW Wildlife Atlas does not have a complete record of core koala habitat and all PVPs involving logging or clearing should be required to have this independent fauna assessment from an accredited koala ecologist.

Planning Legislation

I recommend a national approach to planning legislation for koalas which may be via the listing under the EPBC Act (see below) or a new specific Koala Protection Act

The listing of the koala under the EPBC Act

There is legislation (TSC Act, Native Vegetation Act), policy (SEPP44), biodiversity strategies/ plans, more plans and a Recovery Plan but core koala habitat continues to be lost and degraded along with the associated loss of koalas. NSW has failed the koala, its koala populations are declining despite all their regulations

The ineffectiveness of all these regulations in NSW prompted me to write a submission (see attached) last year supporting the nomination of the koala to be listed as vulnerable under the EPBC Act. This is the mechanism for the Federal government to take responsibility for the koala, its health and its habitat.

Recommendation for Consideration by the Committee

At the time of writing this submission I do not know what decision has been made by the Minister concerning the listing of the koala.

I therefore repeat my recommendation that the koala be listed as vulnerable under the EPBC Act.

The adequacy of the National Koala Conservation and Management Strategy.

It is good to have a national koala strategy but if it has no power and little funding it is not going to be able to achieve any change.

Appropriate future regulation for the protection of koala habitat

1. A specific Koala (Habitat) Protection Act administered by the Federal government.
2. A regulation which protects individual resident koalas affected by development or logging. If koalas are going to be impacted by a necessary infrastructure development then translocation of the affected animals to a safe area may be an option. This has been done for koalas in Port Macquarie affected by the Oxley Highway upgrade. However it should be the last resort and strict guidelines and methodology must be decided. It is a better option than leaving affected koalas with no food or water resources resulting in stress, disease, increased risk of road death or dog attack and premature death which is what happens now.

Other related matters

Translocated Koala Populations

I have become increasingly concerned for the translocated koalas in South Australia and the apparent lack of management and monitoring of the koalas in the Adelaide Hills and those translocated from Kangaroo Island to the south-east of the State.

These koalas may be Chlamydia-free but they are still susceptible to drought, bushfires and climate change and there are indications they suffer from kidney disease related to chronic dehydration. There is an animal welfare obligation to ensure these animals are not being translocated into areas where there is insufficient habitat to sustain them.

Recommendation – Management Plans and regular monitoring of all these populations.

Koalas in captivity

The koala has become a victim of its iconic status. Many koalas have been taken from the wild to be kept in captivity in zoos and wildlife parks all over Australia and overseas.

Recommendation-The Senate Committee should initiate an investigation into the mortality rates of koalas in captivity and whether the koalas in captivity are a sustainable population or are koalas still been taken from the wild. I have certainly heard of this happening and it seems this is poorly regulated, at least in NSW.

References

- Ajani, J. 2007 "The Forest Wars" Melbourne University Press
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- Standing V.R. 1990 A Study of Koalas in the Macleay Valley District- Past, Present and Future. Unpublished report for the Koala Preservation Society of NSW.